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# CHRISTIANITY

AND

# HISTORY

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

SOURCES OF THE APOSTOLIC CANONS

*Translated by LEONARD A. WHEATLEY*

WITH AN INTRODUCTORY ESSAY ON

THE ORGANISATION OF THE EARLY CHURCH AND THE EVOLUTION OF THE READER

*By the Rev. JOHN OWEN*

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# CHRISTIANITY

AND

# HISTORY

BY

ADOLF HARNACK

*Translated, with the Author's sanction, by*

THOS. BAILEY SAUNDERS

*With an Introductory Note*

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## *INTRODUCTORY NOTE*

*The following essay was originally published in the form of a lecture; and it was delivered to the members of that branch of the Evangelical Union which is established in Berlin.*

*The Union is a remarkable feature of the present state of religious life in modern Germany. It was founded in* 1887 *after the conclusion of the* Kulturkampf, *with the professed object of protecting the interests of Protestantism against the increasing power of the Roman Church. In that respect it bears some resemblance to certain*

*associations and alliances in England; but its scope is much wider than theirs, its spirit is more liberal, and its work and influence have obtained a larger measure of success. The Union is fortunate, perhaps, in having no call to devote attention to ceremonial anomalies in the Churches to which its members belong; nor are its energies consumed in discussing the relative advantages of looking to the East or to the North at a particular juncture, or the appropriate shape and colour of ecclesiastical vestments.*

*Its time and strength are employed on the endeavour to preserve the Christian faith, as revealed in the Gospels, pure and undefiled. The members believe that where the Curia has wrought its will, it has disseminated superstition and exercised an*

*intolerable tyranny; and although they represent a great variety of opinion, they are united in combating the influence of Rome, whether in the religious or in the political life of the Fatherland. To suppose that most of them are fanatics— and it is a common supposition in these days in regard to any body of militant Protestants — would be to do them a grievous injustice. They rest their belief on a calm review of the facts of history, and their resolution is the outcome, not of any sectarian prejudice, but of an intelligent desire to promote whatsoever things are wholesome and true.*

*While resistance to the doctrine and the policy of the Roman Church is the chief business of the Union, it has other objects which it seems to pursue with no less zeal.*

*Among them is the defence of Christianity in the face of the difficulties which it has had to encounter at the hands of philosophy and science.*

*Here as in Germany and elsewhere, those who adopt or profess this faith are guided by very diverse motives. There are many who endeavour to shape their lives in accordance with its precepts; there are others who embrace it out of sheer alarm; others, again, who affect both the creed and the practice of it; and not a few, like the magistrates in Gibbon's ironical analysis, who regard it as useful for political or social purposes. Finally, there is a large number of men and women who are outwardly adherents of the faith, but treat it with indifference or contempt.*

*Not alone among the members of the*

*German Evangelical Union, but in any large society of Christians anywhere, there are likely to be representatives of every one of these classes; and the attitude of them all is in some degree affected by any attack upon the Christianity which they profess in common. They meet the attack in various ways, according to the bent of their temper, the range of their knowledge, or the conceptions which they have formed or inherited. The Union embraces almost every known species of the Protestant theory of Christianity, between the extremes of unlimited indulgence in personal judgment and the narrowest bibliolatry. Within its circle the most unquestioning bigot may sit down with a rigorous historian or an uncompromising critic; and as in other controversies, the*

*lines of defence largely depend for their strength and character upon the personality of the apologist.*

*When in October last the authorities of the branch of the Union in Berlin invited Professor Harnack to inaugurate a course of lectures, and that eminent scholar chose the relation between Christianity and history for his theme, the adherents of every grade of opinion found themselves in the company of a fellow-member who, by his own special studies and achievements, had earned the title not only of an exact historian, but also of an acute and far-seeing critic. As it was my privilege to be on a visit to Professor Harnack at the time, I had an opportunity of observing the profound attention with which his remarks were followed by a very large*

*audience, and of comparing or contrasting the reception which an address of this nature, delivered by a speaker of the like distinction, would have met with at home. It must be confessed that in this country, even outside the ranks of those who call themselves orthodox, the German historian, or the German critic, is sometimes regarded as a kind of literary Gorgon, who, if he fixes his gaze upon the field of theological inquiry, drives all the religion out of it and turns it to stone. The orthodox can hardly be brought to admit that, although he may have given long and serious attention to the problems involved in that study, he may yet be quite a respectable person, and as devout a Christian as any of themselves. It occurred to me that I might be of some*

*service in helping to dispel this curious delusion, and at the same time assist in spreading a view of the relation between Christianity and history, as it was conceived by one of the most competent judges in Europe, if I translated this lecture, which was of a character to claim the interest of all thoughtful persons everywhere.*

*Its object is to show in what sense religion, and more especially the Christian religion, can be said to be dependent upon historical facts: how far it is established, if certain alleged events are proved to have actually happened; how far it is overthrown, if they are found to be the product of myth or incredible legend. Among those who profess themselves adherents of this religion, and also among*

*those who do not or cannot accept it, there is a growing tendency to assume that the result of historical criticism is to shake its foundation; and this belief, while it fills some persons with satisfaction and others with dismay, leads a still larger number to seek support for their faith in a refusal to listen to any argument at all.*

*But the belief that the Christian religion has been undermined by historical criticism is largely due to ignorance, or at least to a radical diversity of opinion, in regard to the nature of its foundation. There is a great difference, as Lessing argued, between the Christian religion and Christ's religion; between the structure of dogma erected by Greek philosophy on a Jewish soil, and the faith held by Christ himself,—*

*the simple faith which every man can hold in common with him. Whatever may be obscure or doubtful in the narrative of the Gospels, the nature of Christ's faith and the purport of his teaching are clear and unmistakable; and, in the main, they can be separated from alien accretions of later growth. It is Christ's own faith, rather than a series of subtle and complicated dogmas, which should form the foundation and the substance of the religion that is called by his name. This, I take it, is the view of Christianity that is adopted in the following pages.*

THOS. BAILEY SAUNDERS.

*February* 1896.

# CHRISTIANITY AND HISTORY

*The name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth . . . neither is there salvation in any other: for there is no other name under heaven given among men, whereby we may be saved.*

Such is the creed of the Christian Church. With this creed she began; in the faith of it her martyrs have died; and to-day, as eighteen hundred years ago, it is from this creed that she derives her strength. The whole substance and meaning of religion,—life in God, the forgiveness of sins, consola-

tion in suffering,—she couples with Christ's person; and in so doing she associates everything that gives life its meaning and its permanence, nay the Eternal itself, with an historical fact; maintaining the indissoluble unity of both.

But is such a connexion defensible? Will it bear intelligent examination? When all history seems to be a ceaseless process of growth and decay, is it possible to pick out a single phenomenon and saddle it with the whole weight of eternity? especially when it is a phenomenon of the past.

If Christ's person were still among us, the matter would perhaps be different. But although we are separated from it by many centuries and an intricate and confusing tradition, we are told, nevertheless, that we must cling to it as though it were endowed

with an eternal presence, and acknowledge it as the rock of our life. Is that possible? Is it right? This is a question which has occupied thoughtful Christians in all ages, and it involves the most serious inquiry into the essential nature and the just claims of Christianity; in a word, into the relation between Christianity and history. All that I can attempt in these brief pages is to indicate the nature of the question, and to offer some considerations by which its meaning and importance may be estimated.

I may begin by mentioning the encouraging fact that the great assault made by the eighteenth century on the connexion between religion and history has been repelled. This assault found its pregnant expression in the principle laid down by Lessing: *Historical truth, which is acci-*

*dental in its character, can never become the proof of the truths of Reason, which are necessary.*

The principle may, indeed, be right; everything depends upon the way in which it is construed. But in the way in which it was understood by Lessing's own generation, influenced as that generation was by Rousseau, it is wrong. The whole of the superficial philosophy of the eighteenth century is at the bottom of it. According to that philosophy, everything that has happened in the way of history is of trivial moment; it is an accident; nay, it even cramps and embarrasses the mind; and there is no salvation anywhere but in the two forces which that generation described as *Nature* and *Reason*. They were regarded as forces that were invariable and constituted

once for all; and no true blessing was to be obtained outside of them. It was believed that every man from the creation downwards possessed in his reason a fixed capital, which was capable of supplying him with everything that might be needful for a virtuous and happy life. It was believed, further, that man was fitted into the framework of nature, and was in harmony with it; and that he had only to unfold his powers in accordance with nature, in order to become a glorious specimen of his kind.

In this view of the world, history was no longer a necessity; for a man could receive absolutely nothing from it which he did not already possess. To the consistent adherents of this view, its logical outcome was that history seemed a strange and wrong-headed

venture; and the cry was all for renouncing its tyranny, and for returning to the freedom of nature. It is true that Lessing himself made great efforts to do justice to history; but his efforts were uncertain, and they were but little understood. His generation had no concern for anything but the truths of reason, alleged to be eternal, and the "natural religion" which it had rediscovered; and in possession of these blessings, it looked down on "the accidents of history" with contempt, and cut the bond between them and religion. All historical religions, so the eighteenth century taught, are at the best only the one true, natural religion in disguise,—the religion which always was and always will be,—and this religion has no other content but Reason, fixed and unalterable. By the

side of it, even Christianity and its founder can make no special or particular claim; for everything that is particular is accidental, superfluous, and intellectually mischievous.

Now to-day this view of the world is not, it is true, extinct; but it has been refuted. In no respect has the spirit of the nineteenth century so strongly opposed the spirit of the eighteenth, as in this.

It is a change which we owe to Herder and the leaders of the romantic movement; we owe it to Hegel and his great scholar Ranke; we owe it, not least of all, to the powerful reaction of the Christian faith. The illusion of a ready-made reason, existing from the beginning, has been dispelled; the idol of a "divine nature" has been unmasked; the vast problem involved in

the facile notion of a "natural religion" has been revealed. In the place of shallow talk about divine nature and profane history, about the "eternal truths of reason" and casual records, we have arrived at the knowledge of *history*; of the history from which we have received what we possess, and to which we owe what we are. In this process two conceptions, above all, came to the front with increasing clearness: *development* and *personality*. They involve an opposition; but it is an opposition which determines the work of the historian in dealing with his facts.

When the meaning of history came to be accurately understood, religion was restored to its place; for religion is no ready-made structure, but a growth; and

Religion - a growth within humanity



it is a growth that falls within the history of humanity. Its developments are no mere outward semblance: they are a reality. Its prophets and founders have been prophets and founders indeed; for they have raised humanity to a higher level. Reverence for the spirit that prevails in history, and gratitude to all those from whom we have received any benefit,—and without it we should have been the poorer in our inner and outer life,—must, therefore, govern our views of that science.

Here we have a critical spirit very different from that which pervaded the so-called age of illumination. The assault which the eighteenth century directed against the connexion between history and religion has, in fact, been a failure. But other assaults have been taking shape in

our own time. There is a whole array of them.

The first proposition that meets us is this: It is just because the Christian religion is a part of history, and consequently of that *development* of which all history consists, that it is no more than a link in that development; and therefore its founder cannot be allowed any peculiar or unique position.

We succeed, let us say, in defeating this attack. A fresh opponent then starts up with the objection that even though the founder of the Christian religion may have been an incomparable man, he lived many centuries ago; and it is therefore impossible to go to him with our troubles and sorrows, and to lay hold of him as the rock of our life: it is not the *person* which we have

any longer to consider, but the *doctrine*, the *principle*.

If, in the end, this opponent be also routed, there is still one more. We are told that we may speak of Jesus Christ as we will, and he may have been all that we say, but that we cannot be certain of it; for where our idea of him has not been destroyed by historical criticism, it has been rendered doubtful; and, even though it were more trustworthy than it is, still the facts of history can never be known with a certainty that would entitle us to make them the foundation of our religious belief.

These are the three barriers that have been opposed to the creed of the Church on the score of history; and it is on these three questions that the whole of the controversy turns. Every form of doubt,

whether secret or open, deals in the main with these questions; and in some shape or other they are doubts which have been entertained and pondered by us all.

# I

## PERSONALITY AND DEVELOPMENT

Now, as regards the first assault: it is the most comprehensive, but also the weakest, of the three.

It is perfectly true that the strength of our modern conception of history lies in the effort which we everywhere make to trace the *development* of things, and to show how one thing has grown out of another. That this is the true task of the historian is a proposition which can no longer be disputed. There can be no manner of doubt that it is only by this

method that a true understanding of history can be attained; and even those who condemn the modern science of history cannot escape the influence of its method. They do the same work as is done by those whom they condemn, but they fail to do it so well; nay, they do it badly and imperfectly.

However, a man must be infatuated to maintain that, because all history is a history of development, it can and must be described as a process of material or mechanical change. Up till now the attempts that have been, and are still being, made in this direction carry their own refutation with them. At the very most, it is only in the sphere of political economy that we can trace a certain stringent order of phenomena, where the

struggle for material existence is supreme; but even there this stringent order is always being disturbed by elements of a non-material character, which exert a powerful influence.

In the history of intellectual and moral ideas, the rough-and-ready way of explaining cause by environment alone breaks down altogether. I admit that even here much may be accounted for in this way, much more than earlier generations suspected: the necessity that drives and compels has often been the mother of progress; and even to-day we can see causes at work, and watch the process of growth. But without the strength and the deed of an individual, of a *personality*, nothing great, nothing that will bring us farther on our way, can be accomplished.

Whence comes the strength of the strong, and the deed of the doer? Whence comes it that the knowledge that might advance us, the thought that might save us, is transmitted from one generation to another as barren and worthless and dead as a stone, until some one seizes it and strikes it into fire? Whence comes that higher order of marriage, where a thought so unites with a soul that each is merged in the other, and belongs to the other, and masters the will? Whence comes the courage that conquers the resistance of a dull and unfeeling world? Whence comes the living power that begets a living conviction?

It is a very limited psychology which fails to see that these are the real levers of history. All that its adherents ask is

whether the man has said anything new; and if so, whether it cannot be deduced from something that went before; and they profess themselves content if they ascertain that it was only "relatively" new, and that nothing very wonderful has happened after all. No! not only in the beginning was the Word, the Word that was at once Deed and Life; but the living, resolute, indomitable Word, namely, the *person*, has always been a power in history, along with and above the power of circumstance. Here, too, it is true, there are intervening links and developments. No torch lights itself; one prophet rouses another; but this mysterious development we can never fathom—we can only feel it.

What is true of history in general, and of all the lines on which intellectual and

spiritual life is enacted, is true in the highest sense of religion, which is the profoundest subject of which history treats. *Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.* Never have the two great central elements of all life and action been more clearly and simply expressed; and our historians still have a lesson to learn from these words, if they are not to lose their way.

Of religion it is true that it, too, has been developed, and that it is in a state of constant development. From its history it may be shown that it has had to yield to the stress of trouble and danger: the trouble that teaches men to pray, the danger that deadens them and makes them grasp at a straw. But the same history

tells us also, that no aspiration and no progress have ever existed without the miraculous exertion of an individual will, of a *person*. It was not what the person said that was new and strange,—he came when the time was fulfilled and spoke what the time required,—but how he said it; how it became in him the strength and power of a new life; how he transmitted it to his disciples. That was his secret, and that was what was new in him. Mankind looks up with reverence to all the great minds that have been given to it,—the thinkers, the artists, the heroes,—but it is only the prophets and the founders of religion that it worships; for it feels that here a power has been at work which frees it from the world, and lifts it above the things of every day.

But if we thus put all prophets and founders of religion into one class, it may be said that we, in our turn, are doing away with the significance of the founder of the Christian religion. That is certainly not the case; for there is no concrete or specific conception embracing the differences to be found among those whom we rightly call prophets and founders of religion. Every one of them is a power for himself, and must be judged by himself. There have been founders of religion both sacred and profane; there have been sublime prophets and strange prophets. An inexhaustible wealth of gift and power has been diffused among them; but the measure of it, their bearing, the goal of their efforts, every circumstance of their lives, differs with each of them. If this

difference were disregarded, nothing would be clear. It would be a piece of presumptuous folly to attempt to lay down, at the outset, the measure of the Spirit—that is, of the Spirit of God—which has borne sway in these individuals.

But it is only of One that we know that he united the deepest humility and a purity of will with the claim that he was more than all the prophets who were before him: the Son of God. Of him alone we know that those who ate and drank with him, glorified him not only as their Teacher, Prophet, and King, but also as the Prince of Life, as the Redeemer and Judge of the world, as the living power of their existence—*it is not I that live, but Christ in me;*—and that presently a band of the Jew and Gentile, the wise and the foolish,

acknowledged that they had received, from the abundance of this one man, grace for grace. This fact, which lies open to the light of day, is unique in history; and it requires that the actual personality behind it should be honoured as unique.

## II

### PERSONALITY AND PRINCIPLE

This disposes of the first objection: that no special or unique position can be attributed to the person of Jesus Christ, because of the presumption that all history takes the form of development.

But now we have to deal with a serious onslaught. Even though the founder of the Christian religion may have been an incomparable man, he lived, we are told, many centuries ago; and therefore it is impossible to take him up into our religious life, and adopt him as its foundation: it

is no longer the person that we have to consider, but the doctrine, or, as it is sometimes called, the *principle*. Nay, the objection is still more severely stated thus: Religion is wholly a matter of relation to God—God and the soul, the soul and God;—everything that intrudes upon this mutual relation destroys its exclusive character, and checks its fervour and its freedom.

I might try to meet this attack by referring to the ecclesiastical doctrine of redemption and reconciliation through Jesus Christ; but I am afraid that if I did so I should hardly make myself clear; for in the form in which the Church has stated that doctrine, it belongs to the things which in these days are least understood, and therefore most open to doubt. Such is the fact; how far it is warranted

is a matter of opinion. I shall therefore attempt to proceed by a different path.

Well then! it is quite true: religion is a relation of the soul to God, and nothing more. That a man should find God and possess Him as *his* God,—should live in the fear of Him, trust Him, and lead a holy and blessed life in the strength of this feeling,—that is the substance and the aim of religion. We can carry our conception of religion no further, nor can we allow any alien element to subsist alongside of it. Let us order our ways and commit our troubles to the love and care of Him who rules—

"Befiehl Du Deine Wege und was Dein Herze kränkt,
Der allertreusten Pflege dess, der den Himmel lenkt."[1]

[1] Paul Gerhardt, the well-known German hymn-writer of the seventeenth century.—TR.

The stronger and purer our feeling of devotion, the more surely is it comprehended in this utterance. It is a truth which has been attested by Christ's disciples in all ages; it was attested by Christ himself in teaching us the Lord's Prayer; and therefore we cannot condemn the theologians who tell us that it is the sum and substance of religion.

But what holds good of all moral ideas, holds good in the highest sense of religion: it is one thing to be sensible of their truth, it is another to be possessed of their power. We may recognise and acknowledge the claims of the Christian religion, and the peace and beauty of the religious life, and yet be quite incapable of raising ourselves to its level. It may hover before our eyes and shine with the radiance

of a star; and yet not burn like a fire in our hearts. We may have the keenest sense of the bonds that we would escape, and yet be totally unable to set ourselves free. Not only may we be so—we are so. There is no one who has had this feeling, or who has it again and again, and is delivered from it, but knows that he has been delivered because God has spoken to him. The man who fails to hear the voice of God for himself is without religion. *Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth,* is the only form in which a religious life is possible.

As the conduct of human life is manifold and various, so, too, is the voice of God. But we know that there are few among us who hear and understand the voice of God, in the secret sphere of their

inner personal life, without human help and intervention. The truth is, rather, that one Christian educates another; heart kindles heart; and the strength to will what we approve comes from the mysterious Power by which one life awakens another. At the end of the series of messengers and agents of God stands Jesus Christ. They point back to him, and it is from him that has sprung the river of life which they bear in themselves as their own. Various indeed is the measure of their conscious relation to him—who could deny it!—but they all live on him and through him.

Here we have a fact which gives an incomparable significance to this personality, as a force still working in history. But the objection with which we have to deal

is not yet exhausted. Jesus Christ, it is said, remains, after all, a power of the past; although it is a power which continues in effect. But when the Christian faith sends us back to him, that is not the view which it takes. We must endeavour to get a closer grasp of what this faith means, in order to understand how far its view is right, supposing that the faith is right at all.

The Christian faith is not, as is so often maintained, a gentle exaltation of our earthly life, or a comfort and relief in its troubles and trials. No! it is decision for God and against the world. It is an eternal life that is involved: the recognition that in and above Nature and her changes there is a realm of sanctity and love, a city not built with hands, whose

citizens we are to be; and with this message there comes to us the demand that we should cleanse our hearts and deny ourselves.

We are here confronted with an alternative which determines our inner life. It is, indeed, a contest; but is victory possible? is there then, in truth, a higher Reality, compared with which the world is as nothing? or do our feelings and presentiments delude us? May it not be that we are altogether confined within the sphere of mechanical nature, the sphere of our earthly existence, and that we are waging a miserable war with our own shadows, with phantoms and spectres? That is the question of questions, the doubt of doubts.

Well! as long as the Christian faith has

existed, these doubts and questions have been resolved by looking to Jesus Christ: resolved, not in the form of philosophical demonstration, but by looking with a confident trust to the image of his life. When God and everything that is sacred threatens to disappear in darkness, or our doom is pronounced; when the mighty forces of inexorable nature seem to overwhelm us, and the bounds of good and evil to dissolve; when, weak and weary, we despair of finding God at all in this dismal world—it is then that the personality of Christ may save us. Here we have a life that was lived wholly in the fear of God—resolute, unselfish, pure; here there glows and flashes a grandeur, a love, which draws us to itself. Although it was all a continual struggle with the world; though

bit by bit one earthly possession after another fell away, and at last the life itself came to an ignominious end; yet no soul can avoid the thought that whoso dies thus, dies well: he dies not, but lives. For it was in this life and death that there first dawned upon mankind the assurance of an eternal life, and a divine love which overcomes all evil, nay, sin itself; and in the presence of a glory which is beyond the reach of death, we have come to perceive the vanity of the world and of all earthly possessions.

Eighteen hundred years separate us from this history; but if we seriously ask ourselves what it is that has given us the courage to believe that in the history of the world God prevails, not only by moral and intellectual forces, but by His presence

in the midst of it; if we ask what it is that leads us to believe in an eternal life—our answer is, that we make bold to believe it in reliance upon Christ. *Jesus lives, and with him I live also.* He is the firstborn among many brothers; he is our surety for the reality of a future world.

So it is, then, that God speaks to us through him. It was testified of Christ that he was the *Way*, the *Truth*, and the *Life*; as such he is still revealed to our inmost feeling, and therein consists his presence to us. As surely as everything depends on the soul finding God and becoming one with Him, so surely is he the true Saviour, Guide, and Lord who leads the soul to God. When the Christian Church proclaims of him that he lives, it is a truth which is still attested to-day;

and the Church is also right in reminding us of his sufferings and his death. But we will not speak of these things now; nor will we speak of them at all after the fashion in which they are so often treated. That the sufferings of the just form the saving point in history, is a truth which we feel in the measure in which our senses are alive to the gravity of the moral issue, and open to the influence of personal sacrifice. But "we draw a veil over the sufferings of Christ, for the very reason that we hold them in such reverence. In our judgment it is an unwarrantable and audacious thing to treat these deep mysteries, in which the divine depths of suffering lie hidden, as an object of barter—to keep an account in them, or to toy and trifle with them; nor to rest until the most worthy

of all actions is made to look common and insipid." [1]

We ought not to forget that faith in Christ is never more than a mere cry of *Lord, Lord,* if it does not pass into the strength of allegiance in the good cause. Not those did he himself call his brothers and his sisters, who desired to see him, or to raise aloft his name in the world; but those who do the will of his Father in heaven. It is by this utterance that we have always to judge the Christian's faith.

[1] Goethe.—Tr.

## III

### PERSONALITY AND HISTORY

THAT in spite of the eighteen hundred years which separate us from him, Jesus Christ can have, nay has, a place in the religious life of the Christian; that his personality, and not his doctrine alone, is still to-day *set for the rising again of many*—I have tried to show. But a third and final attack confronts us. You may, we are told, talk of Jesus Christ as you will, and he may have been all that you say, but you cannot be certain of it; for where our idea of him has not been destroyed by historical

criticism, it has been rendered doubtful; and even though it were more trustworthy than it is, still the facts of history can never be known with a certainty that would entitle us to make them the foundation of our religious belief.

This objection is the most serious of the three; and if it were in all respects justifiable, it would go ill with us.

"Where our idea of him has not been destroyed by historical criticism, it has been rendered doubtful." At the first blush it looks as if this were indeed the case. I pass over such results of criticism as flourish to-day, and to-morrow are cast into the oven; I speak only of those which are brought before us again and again with increasing force. If we direct our attention first of all to the external historical facts, we find that

the tradition as to the incidents attending the birth and the early life of Jesus Christ has been shattered; and so too has been the credibility of many of the stories which were told of him. We find, too, that criticism cannot lay the ancient doubts raised by the reports of what took place on the first Easter morning. As regards the picture of his life, as regards his discourses and the doctrine he taught, the historical way of looking at them seems to transform them altogether.

The man who reads his Bible in a homely way is wont to treat all the characteristic features which he encounters in that book as above and beyond time. He sees and feels such things only as he takes to form the true kernel of the narrative: things which concern himself; and it was by

these that the Christian doctrine was formerly established by the Church. But the historical way of looking at them may not, and will not, overlook the concrete features in and by which the life and the doctrine were actually fashioned in their day. It seeks for points of connexion with the Old Testament and its developments, with the religious life of the Synagogue, with contemporary hopes for the future, with the whole intellectual and spiritual condition of the world of Greece and Rome; and it finds that the evidence of such connexion is unmistakable. The consequence is, that the sayings and discourses of the Lord, and the image of his life itself, not only take their colour—and it is a very definite colour—from the history of the time, but they are also seen to possess

certain definite limitations. They belong to their time and their environment; and they could not exist in any other. But they lose no particle of their power and validity, unless it can be shown that the main lineaments of the personality of Christ, and the sense and true point of his sayings, have been altered. I cannot discover that historical criticism has effected any such change.

The same is true of the testimony which he gave of himself. I admit that if historical research had proved that he was an apocalyptic enthusiast or a visionary, whose image and utterances were advanced to the level of pure aim and lofty thought only by the refining influence of later times, it would be another matter. But who has proved that, and who could prove it? For

besides the four written Gospels we possess a fifth, unwritten; and in many respects its voice is clearer and more effective than those of the other four—I mean the united testimony of the first Christian community. It enables us to gather what was the prevailing impression made by this personality, and in what sense his disciples understood his words and the testimony which he gave of himself. It is true that his clothes—the outward form of his doctrine—were part of the heritage; but the great and simple truths which he came to preach, the personal sacrifice which he made, and his victory in death, were what formed the new life of his community; and when the apostle Paul with divine power described this life as a life in the Spirit,[1] and again

[1] Rom. viii.

as a life in love,[1] he was only giving back the light which had dawned upon him in and through Jesus Christ his Lord. This is a simple matter of fact, which no historical criticism can in any way alter. All that it can do is to place it in a clearer light, and so increase our reverence for the divinity which was revealed in radiance in a Son of Abraham, amid the wreck and refuse of a narrow world. Let the plain Bible-reader continue to read his Gospels as he has hitherto read them; for in the end the critic cannot read them otherwise. What the one regards as their true gist and meaning, the other must acknowledge to be such.

But the facts, the facts! I do not know how there can be a greater fact than the

[1] 1 Cor. xiii.

one which I have just been describing. By the side of it, what can any historical detail signify?

We are told, however, that an historical detail has a very obvious significance; that it is only the external fact, nay, the miraculous fact, which can afford us the final and only certainty that there exists a reality corresponding to our belief; that the objects of our belief are not mere phantoms of thought, but that God Himself governs the course of history, and is leading it to its goal.

I am well aware of the gravity of this assertion, and I am far from disputing the right of everyone to make it if he chooses. If God would but rend the heavens and come down, that we might behold Him!—it is a cry that is often

heard. But I know, too, that it is not born out of the depth and strength of the faith which the apostle Paul describes, and that it readily falls under the utterance of the Lord: *Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe.* Great is the power of external authority in matters of religion; great is the power of signs and wonders; but only where their substance lies can faith and devotion find their ultimate assurance. Their substance is God the Lord; it is reliance on Jesus Christ, whose word and spirit are even to-day a witness to the heart of the power of God.

Woe to us if it were otherwise; if our faith rested on a number of details, to be demonstrated and established by the historian. It would be mere sophistry

for any historian to claim that he had achieved such a task; for it is assuredly true that no detail of the past can attain such a degree of evidential certainty that it could form the foundation for bricks and mortar, let alone a whole eternity. Testimonies, documents, assertions—when all is said, to what do they amount?

There is, I admit, a difference between fact and fact. The actual external details are always a matter of controversy; and in this sense Lessing was perfectly right when he warned us against coupling matters of the highest moment with "accidental truths of history," and hanging the whole weight of eternity on a spider's thread. But the spiritual purport of a whole life, of a personality, is also an historical fact: it has its reality in the

effect which it produces; and it is here that we find the link that binds us to Jesus Christ. It is a feeling which is one with devotion itself; and this is what the same Lessing meant when he spoke the word of deliverance: "Even though we may be unable to remove all the objections that may be made against the *Bible*, nevertheless, in the heart of all Christians who have attained to an inner sense of its essential truths, *Religion* remains steadfast and intact."

But are we to say that such external details as have been handed down are of no significance whatever? Who would be so shortsighted, or so frivolous, as to maintain such a proposition? Because we cannot build upon them, they are far from having no significance. First of

all, we have to examine whether they are not actually true after all. Much that was formerly rejected has been re-established on a close investigation, and in the light of comprehensive experience. Who in these days, for example, could make such short work of the miraculous cures in the Gospels as was the custom of scholars formerly?

Then, too, it may be said of all that is told of Jesus Christ, that it is written as a *lesson* for us. That is a consideration which in our controversies is often unduly overlooked; but it is in keeping with the objects of the oldest writers, and the practice of the oldest teachers. In matters of religious tradition it is the peculiarity of much that passes for historical, that the spiritual meaning to be found in it

is its most important feature. Where something is maintained as an historical fact, it is more often than not a defence of the article of faith bound up with it. It is through the formula, *Conceived of the Holy Ghost*, that the dogma of the Divine Sonship of Jesus Christ is proclaimed; in and with the message of the Ascension we are taught that he lives and rules with the Father.

This leads us to another aspect of the religious significance of external details, which is closely related to that which I have been mentioning. They have been to faith what the prop is to the vine, or a sheltering screen to the tender plant. They have given it support and guidance, or they have protected its growth from the influence of wind and weather; and the

service which they have rendered in the past, they still render to-day to many. The difficulty is that one man's faith requires a strong stake to prop it, or some kind of protective shelter; whilst another finds the prop break in his hands, and his faith bloom only in the free light of the sun.

Finally, much in the New Testament that is recorded as history, much that affects us most deeply, is not only told us as a lesson, but, in the form in which it is given, it possesses a deep *symbolical* significance. I know none of the leading events of the narrative of which that cannot be said. The same spirit which unveiled to our eyes the power and the glory of a divine life, so far as mankind is able to grasp it, has also veiled the

truth for us with a delicate web of ingenious legend, a poetry that moves the heart, and has thus brought it home in picture and parable.

That the stories which are told of Christ possess this manifold significance, will be obvious to everyone who considers the history of Christianity with an open mind and a humble heart. It is an interpretation of the facts which is not without its dangers; for on the one hand it may readily lead a man to foist his own mind upon history, to confuse the plant with the prop, and so to conjure up grave difficulties; and on the other, it may deaden the force of historical facts as real facts, and the personality of Christ as a real personality. However, the difficulties which have arisen here are

not of our making, and we cannot resolve them in any arbitrary fashion of our own. Rather let us trust to that divine guidance which knows what is good for us; let us proclaim truly, and with a pure mind, the knowledge which we have received; and then let us endeavour to understand the profound saying, that natural strength and the crutch that supports it come from the same source—*Kräfte und Krücken kommen aus* EINER *Hand.*[1]

It may, perhaps, have been expected that I should speak of other matters: of the changes which Christianity has experienced in the course of its history, or of the blessings which it has spread abroad in the world. But a knowledge of the

[1] Goethe.—TR.

fundamental question, namely, how far religion and history are connected, and how they are united in the evangelical faith, is more important than anything else. This evangelical faith need fear no test that can be applied to it. It can bear a strict and methodical scrutiny of the facts which form its historical foundation; nay, for its own sake it must demand such a scrutiny; for while it has no concern with Pilate's speculative question—what is truth?—yet the knowledge of the truth is assigned as its mission, and there, too, its promise will be fulfilled.

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